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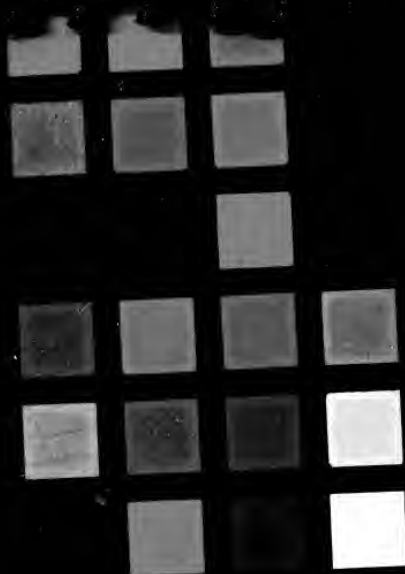
Shakespeare's Rationalism

*His opinion of the Jew and the Christian in
"The Merchant of Venice."*

A Lecture Delivered Before the Inde-
pendent Religious Society, Orchestra
Hall, Michigan Avenue and
Adams St., Chicago, Illinois,
Sunday, at 11 A. M.



By
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Ever remember that thou art human; ever remember that all others are human also, and, with all individual differences, the same as thou, having the same needs and claims as thyself: this is the sum and substance of morality.

—Strauss.

Shakespeare's Rationalism

HIS OPINION OF THE JEW AND THE CHRISTIAN IN "*THE MERCHANT OF VENICE*."

Shakespeare's rationalism is nowhere so pronounced as in *The Merchant of Venice*. By his rationalism we mean his freedom from unreasoned and unreasonable beliefs. With extreme care and great fairness Shakespeare tests the claims of two of the leading religions of the world—Judaism and Christianity—and finds that they both snap under the strain of human passion. When brought into contact with the real experiences of life, when summoned to make peace between two determined and inveterate antagonists, they break down completely. The story of *The Merchant of Venice* demonstrates that while for professional and decorative purposes these ancient cults may be useful, for practical ends they are an incumbrance rather than a help—indeed, they are an insurmountable obstacle in the way of the fraternization of individuals and races.

This is radical teaching, and coming as it does from so great an authority as Shakespeare, it should at least command our interest sufficiently to induce us to examine his argument. How does Shakespeare arrive at the above conclusion—a conclusion which must appear even shocking to a great many of his readers who have never found in *The Merchant of Venice* anything more than an exciting racial or religious quarrel between a money-lending Jew and a Christian merchant?

There are scenes in *The Merchant of Venice* which are among the most compelling in the dramatic literature of the

world. The meeting between Shylock and his co-religionist, Tubal, for instance, never fails to interest, no matter how often it has been acted. Tubal approaches Shylock with two different items of news—the one that Shylock's daughter who has fled with a Christian, equipped with her father's jewels and ducats, has not yet been apprehended; and the other bit of news is that on the Venetian Rialto everybody is talking of Antonio's financial reverses. These two pieces of information produce upon Shylock the same effect that water and wind have upon a burning fire—the one helping to extinguish the flame, the other fanning it into a blaze. At the news of his rival's misfortunes his whole being glows with an unearthly light, and his thoughts and gestures multiply at a rapid rate. This intelligence of Antonio's bankruptcy when communicated to him draws from him in quick succession these ejaculations:

What, what, what? Ill luck, ill luck?
* * * * *
I thank God, I thank God! Is it true, is it true?

But the information about his runaway daughter dampens his spirits and his voice falls and fades into a moan.

Picturesque, though not as intense, is the casket scene which draws from fair Portia, one of Shakespeare's royal women, the protest of the young and the living against the tyranny of the old and the dead: "O, me, the word choose! I may neither choose whom I would nor refuse whom I dislike, *so is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father.*"

The confidential, and unaffected conversation between Portia and Nerissa in the first act is also very interesting. Portia's discontent is unintelligible to Nerissa. Why should so beautiful and so richly gifted a woman be unhappy? Perhaps it is because Portia has *too* many blessings. *Too many* is as much a misfortune as *not any*.

"They are as sick, that surfeit with too much, as they that starve with nothing."

Where then lies happiness? In moderate possessions.

"It is no mean happiness, therefore, to be seated in the mean."

Instructive also are Bassanio's comments on men and things when he is about to decide which casket to choose.

The world is still deceived with ornament.
In law what plea so tainted and corrupt,
But, being seasoned with a gracious voice,
Obscures the show of evil?

In the same way religion is invoked to cloak cruelty and to adorn oppression:

In Religion,
What damned error, but some sober brow
Will bless it, and approve it with a text,
Hiding the grossness with fair ornament?

And many are led to their ruin by mistaking the appearance for the reality:

Thus ornament is but the guiled shore
To a most dangerous sea; * * * In a word
The seeming truth which cunning times put on
To entrap the wisest.

It is while musing thus, that he rejects the gaudy gold and chooses the unpromising, humble, "meagre lead," and finds in the neglected casket "Fair Portia's counterfeit." The enthusiasm of Bassanio in describing Portia's beauty and virtues appears to be fully shared by the poet himself. Shakespeare has created a world of women, but of which of them was he fonder than of Portia?

Why if two gods should play some heavenly match,
And on the wager lay two earthly women,
And Portia one, there must be something else
Pawned with the other; for the poor rude world
Hath not her fellow.

Of course the most powerful scene of all in the play, and

the one which is most nearly perfect in all of Shakespeare's works, is the trial scene presided over by Portia.

Let us imagine ourselves in old Venice on the day of the trial. The picturesque court-room as well as the approaches to the palace of justice are densely crowded by an eager multitude, clamoring to get within earshot of the speakers. Close by is the gentle Adriatic, smiling upon everyone who is thoughtful enough on that busy day to turn and look at her. In the court-room the magistrates, the clerks and the witnesses, have taken their places and are breathlessly waiting for the case to open.

The eyes of all the spectators suddenly turn toward a strange looking man—slight and stooping—though striking in features, walking with a loud step into the presence of the court. Something akin to terror falls upon the audience when it meets the eyes of Shylock, which are like two raging fires under his thick, black eyebrows. In this hostile assembly the accuser of Antonio takes his position, supported by a mingled sense of personal insult and hate which has at last climbed up to his lips and is ready to burst forth as a torrent, menacing the life of everyone that steps in its path. It is evident that he will not be reasoned with. Appeals in the name of charity or humanity shall move him less than the waves the rooted rock. They will pray to him, or plead with him in vain. He is Shylock, who solitary shall stand his ground against the whole court—yes, against civilization itself. His opportunity has come, and he will not lose it for the price of humanity. Can we imagine the sensations of the spectators in such a presence!

As the trial proceeds, it becomes evident that there is no weapon in the possession of the court that can pierce his almost sublime obstinacy. He stands rooted in his thought, and will not budge. He is like an ancient and gnarled tree; straighten him if you can. In his purpose he is so firmly knit and compact that no room can be found for an invading idea. He is unwedgable.

At first it seems as if everything is about to give way

to the onslaught of his will. His grip tightens upon his adversary; the whole court is cowed into dismay. And feeling himself in control of the situation, his master passion out-distancing all the timid efforts of his judges, he prepares for the act of premeditated revenge.

Just then Portia dressed like a doctor of law is ushered into the court-room. The atmosphere of the room changes immediately. Both parties to the strange suit, as well as the judges and spectators, find themselves in a new presence—radiant, wholesome, luminous! For a moment at least, all other interests are swallowed up in the spontaneous admiration which her person provokes in the minds of the people gathered in the court-room. She bursts upon them like a revelation. With what grace and puissant emphasis she must have given her noble definition of charity—a definition which can never be improved!

The quality of mercy is not strained.

There is in this one line as much truth and beauty as thought can create or words can carry.

Swiftly Portia drives the complainant, Shylock, to the crucial question: Is he capable of a great act of magnanimity? Will he rise above passion and prejudice to the dignity of reason? Will mercy flow from his heart unrestrained like the medicinal gum from the Arabian trees, or the gentle rain from Heaven? No? Then he shall have justice. By an unexpected stroke she swamps the scales in Shylock's hands. He who stood immovable in his purpose is suddenly, as it were, lifted off his feet and sent tossing to his fate. The abyss closes over him, and he is heard no more.

All this the poet has set forth with so consummate an art that though no one knows how many times during the last three hundred years the play has been witnessed, still, neither the touch of time nor the frequency of repetition, has in the least aged its beauty or made its impressions upon us less intense.

Woven in with the sombre issues which form the sub-

stratum of the play, we find a number of golden threads. There is, for instance, the wooing of fair Portia by a train of spectacular suitors; the three caskets of gold, silver and lead, in one of which is concealed Portia's picture, the finder of which may claim her hand in marriage. Then there is the love scene between Lorenzo and Jessica, and the piquant story of the rings with which the play closes. But of course the death struggle between Antonio, the Christian, and Shylock, the Jew,—the representatives of a world-wide hate between two races and religions—is the theme of the play.

Why did Shakespeare select such a theme? In the opinion of some, (1) Shakespeare intended to show the superiority of the European races over the oriental, and of the Christian religion over Judaism. Others have argued that the purpose of the play was largely ethical, being an attempt to illustrate the value of charity and kindness in our relations with one another. (2) Still others see in the play Shakespeare's intention to advocate a human fellowship, which shall extend beyond the boundaries set by creeds and races. (3) There have even been those who have quoted this play to show (4) that Shakespeare was an anti-Semite, writing to nurse the popular prejudice against the Jew; (5) while, with equal assurance, others have interpreted the play as an argument against the Christian for his treatment of the Jew. It is not easy to agree as to why Shakespeare wrote this play,—if he had any specific purpose at all. In all likelihood, he had no other motive than the desire to avail himself of an ancient legend in producing a popular comedy. Being a man of genius, the theme developed into a masterpiece under his treatment, to which we may all repair for instruction, each carrying away as much as his mind will hold, and precisely the kind of thought that will best accord with his prejudices. In some respects a masterpiece is like one of nature's resources: it can be tapped to fill a thimble, or to quench the thirst of a world. In offering our own interpretation, we do so in no spirit of dogmatism, as we have no access to any infallible means of knowledge which are denied to others. 4

While Shakespeare may have selected this theme accidentally, we believe that the *manner* in which he deals with it is not only characteristic of his art, but it is also a revelation of his thought. "Poetry," says Mathew Arnold, "is a criticism of life." The great author of *The Merchant of Venice* has given us in this play *his* criticism of the institutions of which Antonio and Shylock were leading representatives.

The bitter conflict which forms the heart of the play, in our opinion, is not between Jew and Christian in reality, nor between Judaism on the one hand and Christianity on the other, but between normal human nature, and the same as perverted by religious institutions.

As we are about to discuss a very delicate, as well as important, subject, I wish to defend myself against any misunderstandings which my remarks may give rise to. The fact that Iago, in the play of Othello, represents one of the worst types of men, is no reflection upon Italians in particular, or upon Catholics in general. In the same way, Shylock, one of the wildest and most ungovernable of human beings, is no reflection upon the Jewish people or their religion. If Shylock was a Jew, so was Nathan the Wise. Shakespeare did no more intend to make this brutalized Jew a representative of his race, than to make that "eternal villian" and "dog," Iago, a type of his. There are, it is needless to say, good and bad people among all races. Only a bigot would contend that all Jews are Shylocks, or that all Italians are Iagos.

To show how one of the most firmly established and deeply venerated institutions plays havoc with human character, the poet invests his Antonio with all the natural virtues—generosity, honor, loyalty, fortitude, equanimity of mind, and a capacity for friendship which approaches heroism. He is introduced as the "best conditioned, unwearied spirit in doing courtesies," in whom "the ancient Roman honor becomes incarnate." Yet Shakespeare also represents this nature's gentleman stooping to practices which would not be tolerated

even in a barbarian. Antonio has the soul of a nobleman, and the manners of a bigot. His education, that is to say, the influence of his environment, namely, the institutions under which he lives, have made nugatory the great qualities of mind with which nature has equipped him. His religion, more than anything else, has made him a sectarian and a persecutor.

Shylock, on the other hand, is by nature a mean man, and the institution he prizes most, his ancestral religion, has not helped him in the least. On the contrary, it has given scope to the perversity of his nature, and, what is worse, has cajoled him into the belief that his vices are virtues. When he hates his brother in the name of his religion, he does so from a sense of duty, which is the gloss religion has given to his perverse nature.

Thus we have in *The Merchant of Venice*, on the one hand, a good man, spoiled by his religion, and on the other, a bad man, made worse by his. We hardly know of a commentator of Shakespeare who has called attention to this as the central thought in *The Merchant of Venice*. On the contrary, the majority of Shakespearean critics, like Prof. Hudson, for instance, have maintained that the play shows the superiority of the Christian spirit of love over the Judaic law of "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth." In the meantime few unprejudiced readers can escape the obvious drift of the comedy, which is to show how ineffectual either Catholicism, which educated Antonio, or Judaism, which educated Shylock, was, in preventing the deadly clash of interests. Instead of making for reconciliation, religion, as either of the two principals or their adherents professed it, changed their neighborly relation into open and vulgar hostility. The play furnishes ample opportunities to see how Antonio and his Christian friends withheld from Shylock the most elementary consideration to which he was entitled as a man, whatever the nature of the religion he professed. But he was not a Christian, and that was paramount to not being a human being. Shylock, on the other hand, had grown nearly old feeding on the hate

he bore Antonio and his confreres, because they were Christians. Such is the corrupting influence of professional religion upon human nature. It degraded the noble Antonio, and it was helpless to reform Shylock.

Now, infidel, I have thee on the hip.

cries Gratiano to the Jew; and Shylock, on the other hand, rubs his hands with glee, thinking of the time when he shall feed fat his ancient grudge against the Christian.

"O, be thou damn'd, inexorable dog!" is the prayer of the Christian for the Jew; while Shylock, on the other hand, prays for a pound of the Christian's flesh "to bait fish withal." What has Judaism done for Shylock? What has Christianity done for Antonio?

The situation is not without humor, inasmuch as both Antonio and Shylock are laboring under the impression that each owes it to his religion that he is not as depraved as the other, while in reality it is the evil influence of the national faiths they profess respectively that one of them is perverted from virtue, and the other is confirmed in his depravity. If religion—the Christian and the Jewish—could not preserve Antonio's virtue, nor curb Shylock's vices, of what use is it to society? This is the searching problem of *The Merchant of Venice*.

When the Jew remonstrates with Antonio for the ill-treatment he has received and the hard names he has been called, the Christian replies:

I am as like to call thee so again,
To spit on thee again, to spurn thee too.

We see how little religion has done for Signior Antonio. Though a gentleman by birth and breeding, he will "spit on" and "spurn" Shylock. For what reason? Let the Jew answer:

You call me misbeliever, cut-throat, dog,
And spit upon my Jewish gaberdine.

and again:

You that did void your rheum upon my beard,
And foot me as you spurn a stranger cur over your thresh-
old * * *

And why?—"Because I am a Jew!"

Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, di-
mensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same
food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same dis-
eases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the
same Winter and Summer, as a Christian is?

Is it not absurd, then, for religion to put asunder what nature
has joined together? Nature offers a thousand reasons, each
of which is of universal import, why men should dwell to-
gether in peace and mutual respect, while religion on the
other hand, upon pretenses of the flimsiest character, such as
theological tenets, mysteries, rites and ceremonies, fans the
fires of persecution, intolerance, sectarian wars and irascible
hatreds. There is not only one, there are a thousand touches
of nature which make the whole world kin. But, then, re-
ligion, Jewish or Christian, shuts its eyes to this glorious
truth and insists that before the question of humanity there
is the question of *faith*, and that he who has not the right
creed is a heathen, and shall be damned.

Shylock himself is, of course, unconscious of the sweet
meaning of the words the poet puts in his mouth. He does
not realize that for the same natural reasons for which he
claims justice at Antonio's hands, he should himself be just
to the Christian. But his Jewish religion has taught him to
look upon the rest of the world as meant for exploitation
and extermination. From his viewpoint the Jew alone is the
chosen one; his own God is real, but other people's Gods are
idols, and the milk and honey of Canaan has been promised
exclusively to him and his co-religionists. Thus sectarian
teaching twists and contorts human nature, and makes ene-
mies out of brothers.

To show further the worthlessness of the religions professed

by Antonio and Shylock, respectively, the great poet uses the following argument :

If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge.
If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his suffrance be by
Christian example? Why, revenge.

Where, then, is the boasted power of Judaism or of Christianity to induce men to forgive injuries and to love their enemies? Is this all that religion divinely given can do for man? If revenge is the cry and desire of both Jew and Christian, in what respect would they have been worse without a Revelation? If religion cannot humanize Shylock, nor prevent the perversion under a false teaching, of Antonio, what is it good for? This is Shakespeare's pressing question in his *Merchant of Venice*.

The poet proceeds to take in hand the remaining threads, so to speak, of his great theme, before proceeding to tie them up in a final knot :

Antonio hates the Jew because he believes him to be wicked; in the same way Shylock hates the Christian because he cannot believe that a Christian can be virtuous. Religion alone is responsible for this.

Nothing but religion such as Antonio professed could have instilled into his mind the idea that Shylock was wicked because he was a Jew :

I pray you, think you question with the Jew.
You may as well go stand upon the beach,
And bid the main flood bait his usual height;
You may as well use question with the wolf,
Why he hath made the ewe bleat for the lamb.
* * * * *

You may as well do anything most hard,
As seek to soften that, (than which what's harder?)
His *Jewish* heart.—

In the same fanatic key is the screech of Shylock:

What, wouldst thou have a serpent sting thee twice?

To the Jew every Christian was a serpent.

Again, when Shylock, hiding his evil motive as best he can, consents to the loan of three thousand ducats with a smiling face, Antonio says:

The Hebrew will turn Christian; he grows kind.

This is one of Shakespeare's most pregnant observations. Antonio's religion has confirmed him in superstition to such an extent that he imagines that no one but a Christian can be kind—that to be kind is "to turn Christian," which in reality means nothing more than to believe as Antonio does. "This Hebrew will turn Christian; he grows kind" is also witheringly sarcastic. Shakespeare has just shown how discourteous and abusive Antonio, the best of Christian gentlemen, has been to an alien in faith, and the suggestion that the Jew is going to change his Hebrew manners to Christian manners, which, judging from Antonio's conduct, consist of kicks, cuffs and abuses, is a superb piece of irony.

Judaism, on the other hand, with all its pretensions, has been just as powerless to effect a change in Shylock, as Christianity has been detrimental to the humanity of Antonio. When Antonio appears upon the scene, Shylock is heard whispering to himself at one end of the stage:

How like a fawning publican he looks!
I hate him for he is a Christian.

He has, as the text announces, other reasons for hating Antonio:

He lends out money gratis, and brings down
The rate of usance here with us in Venice.

But he can not keep religion out of his mind very long, so he adds:

If I can catch him once upon the hip,
I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him.
He hates our *sacred* nation * * * cursed be my tribe,
If I forgive him.

But the thought that his neighbor is of another religion, for which reason he should be hated, springs to his lips first. How magnificent is the protest of our immortal Shakespeare against religious bigotry and hatred! Shylock would never have dreamt of hating another human being living in the same city with him for professing a different religion from his own, had he not been tutored and trained therein by his ancestral faith. Think of a religion which inspires hatred of one's fellows! It is not the abuse of Judaism which is responsible for this religious hatred to which Shylock gives expression, for the Bible is full of alleged divine commandments to hate, despoil, and murder, the unbeliever. There is no getting away from these regrettable texts, texts which have dipped the world in blood. No educated, liberal Jew will defend Judaism; it is and was, a persecuting religion.

Shakespeare also shows that whenever Shylock or Antonio—or the Jew and the Christian—come together for the transaction of any business, they do so with the idea of hurting instead of helping each other. So completely has religion alienated them, that to insult and injure one another has come to be a sort of religious duty to both the Christian and the Jew. Antonio asks for the loan as from an enemy, and is not surprised at the terms exacted, for it seems quite natural to him that the Jew should desire his death. Knowing this, Antonio receives the money as one would a stab from a dagger.

Shakespeare in this play wields a mighty sword, flashing and scintillating as it cuts its way into the very motives which inspire hate in the breast of man. Why is Shylock so bitter against Antonio? "I hate him for he is a Christian," that seems to be his best reason.

See what his religion can do for him. In Lessing's "Nathan the Wise," human nature triumphs over the religious, but in Shylock, the religious perversion seems to be too radical to be cured.

If the Jews of today exhibit all the virtues and humanities, they owe it, not to their Old Testament religion, but to the

development of human nature in them which is older and, under favorable conditions, surer to triumph over all hindrances. Likewise, if the Christians of today are tolerant, neighborly and progressive, they owe it to nature and environment and not to their *infallible* religion.

When Jessica, Shylock's daughter, says, "Our house is hell," Shakespeare uses these words to give further proof that orthodoxy and virtue are two different things. Religion is not morality. There was Shylock, Antonio, Bassanio, Salarino, Salanio, and Lorenzo, they were all quite religious, but what had religion done for them? The last mentioned Venetian, Lorenzo, stole not only Shylock's daughter, but also his property; while Bassanio not only consented to borrow money at his friend's risk, but he plainly intimates that he is after Portia's fortune. No doubt he was also charmed with her beauty, but listen to his confidential words to his friend, Antonio:

In Belmont is a lady richly left.

That is the first mention of Portia to Antonio,—“richly left,”—and he further tells his friend that if he succeeds in winning Portia he will be in a position to repay all his indebtedness. Was he not something of an adventurer?

Again, when at the conclusion of the trial scene, Antonio is asked for an expression of opinion, he says that one-half Shylock's fortune should go “unto the gentleman that lately stole his daughter.” Shakespeare is sharp and caustic here. His words crack and smart like a whip,—“the *gentleman* that lately stole his daughter”—this same gentleman stole, also, Shylock's property, and Antonio approves of his theft and recommends him to the Venetian Senate to be honored by a further reward. This may be religious, but it is neither moral nor human. There is a further argument the poet uses, which, perhaps, is even more telling against the mischief for which religion is responsible.

Very often Shakespeare puts his boldest thoughts in the mouths of clowns or fools. He did this, perhaps, to defend

himself against fanatical criticism. Children and fools are pardoned for speaking the truth. In *The Merchant of Venice*, it is Launcelot, the simpleton, who is the mouthpiece of the poet. In a conversation with Jessica, the daughter of the Jew, who has been brought up under the influence of the Old Testament, Launcelot tells her that she cannot be saved because her father is a Jew. Shakespeare has made Launcelot the interpreter of the orthodoxy of his day. Just as the Jew has been taught by his Bible that the rest of the world should be exterminated, the Christian has been brought up to believe that none but a Christian should be saved. To Launcelot's remark, Jessica answers that she is going to be saved through her Christian husband. Shakespeare is again very aggressive here. There is a rich humor in the answer of Jessica that though she is a Jew, she is going to be saved, not through the virtue of her husband who was a kidnaper and a robber, but because he possesses the right belief. Does not the idea strike us as absurd, viewed in the light which Shakespeare has thrown upon it? Yet that was the doctrine and the practice in Shakespeare's day. To this argument of the Jewess, the fool, Launcelot, makes reply that there are enough of Christians already, and that "this making of Christians will raise the price of hogs; if we grow all to be pork-eaters."

Jessica informs her husband what Launcelot has just told her—that there is no mercy in Heaven because she is the daughter of a Jew. "You are not a good member of the commonwealth," she says to her husband, "for in converting Jews to Christians you raise the price of pork." It is impossible not to believe that Shakespeare is purposely exposing the terrible superstition of his day, and holding it up to the ridicule it deserves. All that the various and expensive missionary agencies accomplish by converting a man from one set of beliefs to another is worth no more than raising the price of pork. Ridicule in the hands of Shakespeare was as powerful a weapon as it was in that of Voltaire, and both

these great minds have laughed many a superstition out of existence.

The baneful effect of religion in leading one party to resort to sophistry, and the other to become rooted in error, is again shown in the great trial scene. Both the Duke and Portia denounce the Jew as a stony adversary without a dram of mercy,—an unfeeling man beyond all hope of being softened and mellowed by prayers or tears; all, of which is true. But Shakespeare shows that this plea for mercy was in the nature of a subterfuge, for if the Christian pleaders really believed in mercy, they would not have wreaked such crushing vengeance on the Jew by forcibly converting him out of one belief into another. To talk of mercy and to persecute is to seek in religion an ally for an evil cause. The sequence of the play proves ~~that~~ if they had the opportunity, they showed Shylock no mercy at all.]

Mercy is not natural to an infallible religion. To show mercy is to countenance heresy or the heretic. "Believe or be damned" is the teaching of both Judaism and Christianity, and is, in fact, the spirit of every religion claiming infallibility and possessing the power to enforce it. Science, art, philosophy, literature, commerce, law, medicine, can be merciful, for they are in need of mercy themselves; but religion cannot be merciful, for it claims to be perfect and infallible!

Prof. Hudson speaks of the Christian liberality of Antonio; but can a Christian afford to be liberal when to be liberal requires the admission of virtue in an infidel? If an infidel, or a non-Christian, can be virtuous, what is the value of a revealed religion? And has Christianity been liberal toward Paganism, or Buddhism, or Mohammedism? Has it not called the founders of these faiths imposters? Did not Jesus call other teachers "robbers and thieves?"* Has Christianity been liberal toward unbelievers? Has it not burned them at the stake? And if today she can no longer burn people here, does she not predict for them the torments of hell? Charity is a natural, not a religious virtue, as may be gathered from the beautiful speech of Portia:

*Read *Gospel of John*.

It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath: it is twice bless'd;
It blesseth him that gives, and him that takes;
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown.
His scepter shows the force of temporal power,
The attribute to awe and majesty,
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of Kings;
But mercy is above this sceptred sway;—

This is natural, human, broad, sound, and sweet above and over and beyond all sectarian prejudice and hate.

When Portia proceeds, however, to say that this mercy is an attribute of God himself, she becomes theological, and we are inclined to ask, "Which God?" Is mercy the attribute of the Mohammedan Allah? Is it the attribute of the Jewish Jehovah? Is it the attribute of the Christian Christ, with his "depart ye cursed into everlasting fire"? Do they not all menace with eternal punishment their enemies? No; mercy is not an attribute of Gods; it is the attribute of those only who themselves stand in need of mercy from one another.

Let us return once more to Shylock. When he has his enemy Antonio in his clutches he looks transfigured. A pound of that merchant's flesh is his, "The court awards it, and the law doth give it." But is he really going to take it? If ever a man needed his religion to help him into good sense and justice, Shylock was the man. But, alas! Shylock's religion only made him whip out his knife and whet it on the leather of his shoe. What a criticism that is on the helplessness of religion to restrain or humanize a naturally vindictive man. Judaism and Christianity, as restraining influences, this play seems to say, are more ornamental than real. The real thing is nature. We repeat that had Shylock never gone to a synagogue in his life—never heard read to him from the word of God the injunction, "Destroy the heathen; thine eye shall have no pity upon them," and again: "Do not I hate them, O Lord, that hate thee," he would have been a better neighbor and citizen. Reflect upon the words:

"Thine eye shall have no *pity* upon them." It expressed the fear of religion lest human nature should interfere to make men brothers, hence the words: "Thine eye shall have no pity upon them." [In Shylock, human nature was completely overpowered by his religious prejudices. "I have an oath in heaven," he cries. And again: "An oath, an oath," which means that it is a matter of religion with him,—it is of the sacredness of an oath that he should show no mercy to his fellowmen.] "Shall I lay perjury upon my soul?" is another way of saying: "The salvation of my soul requires, or it is a matter of life and death with me, to hate my Christian neighbor and to thirst for his blood." Was it not appalling? Here we have a man who thinks that it is a religious duty that he should bite off or cut out with a knife his neighbor's flesh. The horror of it! Into what depths of degradation does not superstition drag a human being!

Shakespeare has put this cry of Shylock: "I have an oath in heaven," in the Jew's mouth to show what a fearful thing it is to profess such a religion. Again, when Shylock cries:

By my soul I swear
There is no power in the tongue of man
To alter me.

he means to say that his hatred is God-inspired, and is a matter between his *soul* and his *God*. His hatred is as eternal as his religion, and both are *inspired*. Thus religion, instead of being a stone of Ajax, was a millstone around Shylock's neck, as it was around the neck of Antonio.

It will be objected to by some that the poet was simply reproducing an ancient tradition without any intention to enter into a religious argument such as we have read into his lines. Both Shylock and Antonio are unreal, it has been said, and to select them as religious types and to draw from their behavior toward one another the conclusion that both Judaism and Christianity are failures as moral forces, is to do violence to Shakespeare's thought.

That the Shylock story is not history does not in the least affect the lesson we have drawn from the conduct of the principal actors in the drama. The "pound of flesh" episode is a fiction, but race prejudice is not; religious hatred is not; nor are intolerance and persecution, religion-inspired, a fiction. To both the Jew and the Christian, Shakespeare gives an opportunity to act, and their acts show what little good religion of one brand or of another has done for them. But they do more than this. They also show how these religions have perverted the instinct of humanity in them, and inflamed their worst passions.

Had Shakespeare believed that one sect produced better moral results than the other, or that by professing Christianity instead of Judaism, or Judaism instead of Christianity, one acquired virtues not otherwise attainable, he could not have helped bringing out so vital a truth in his treatment of the relation between Antonio and Shylock. Neither would he have described in such strong terms the complete bankruptcy of both Judaism and Christianity when pitted against reality, did he not believe at heart that if the Christian forgot that the Jew was human, and that he, too, had "organs, dimensions, senses, etc.," it was due to his religious training which had taught him to look upon the non-Christian as a heathen and a publican; and if the Jew would commit the most odious act in the world—tear or cut a pound of flesh from his brother's breast—alas, it was because he had been taught to pray, "Do not I hate them, O Lord, that hate thee?"

Antonio's religion was Christianity; Shylock's, Judaism. The one could never have loved the other unless the other was converted to his own faith. But there is a religion which teaches the brotherhood of man, irrespective of race or creed—it is the *Religion of Humanity*.

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